

**Inside the Caprice des Dieux:
NCRE European Parliament
Spring 2004 Internship,
– Trip Report**

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1. Introduction

This Report gives a general outline of my three months at the European Parliament (EP) and the value of the Internship, along with some observations and tips that may or may not be useful for future Interns. I had some clear and many vague ideas what I was going to do in Brussels, crystallised by the knowledge that this was a once only opportunity, both to operate in one of the more amazing political experiments of our time and to experience what Brussels and its surrounds have to offer.

2. Background Comments

I took up a 3-month stage, February - April 2004. While all stages will naturally differ, mine was shaped by my age and the proximity of the EP elections and Enlargement.

2.1. The aging stagiaire

I am considerably older than the vast majority of stagiaires at the EP (almost all are in their early 20s)! This meant that I was never a likely candidate for the lively stagiaire social calendar. I was also treated more as an equal by staff and politicians alike and was never remotely expected to make or fetch the coffee, or photocopy documents - which I would not have minded doing! Instead, I enjoyed a different, but no more or less valuable, set of experiences than would otherwise have been the case. Being an "old fox" as they say here, I was also able to work independently and with minimum support from staff or politicians which they appreciated given the second issue, the looming elections. In any case, I did meet several people my own age at the EP on short-term secondments from their Regional or national governments to their party secretariats so they can find out what Brussels is doing, and some of the less young German Assistants so I was not alone. Age is not an issue, despite my initial misgivings.

2.2. The Elections and Enlargement

The EP Elections are to be held June 2004. Accordingly, all minds and work focus on the end of April, when Parliament more or less winds up. Focus varies - the MEPs are campaigning (some harder than others, depending on their location on Party Lists: my host was reasonably relaxed, given her high list position; the office staff next door were busy looking for jobs as their man had been relegated to the bottom).

In practical terms this meant that MEPs from the Australia and New Zealand Delegation, who had previously indicated that they would take a 3-month intern, changed their minds in the New Year when reality reached closer. Janet Lowe, the NZ Embassy and Mission Councillor, worked hard and got me a placement on the basis of a month each in three MEPs offices. This was then converted to a month in the office of MEP, Frau Ewa Klamt, EPP-ED¹ Group, and the remainder in the Environment Committee Secretariat under Francis Jacobs. In reality this turned into six weeks in each. This was highly fortuitous as Francis says that usually they never take anyone for less than two years, but someone had

¹ Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats

just left, leaving an empty desk. Nicely, the MEP and staff said I could stay the whole three months if I wanted when it was time to go!

The problem, as everyone saw it apart from me, was that there was consequently little work to do - the politicians were campaigning for the elections, while the administrators were tidying up the final work before the elections. For me, this did not matter as I was far more interested in the processes operating in the EP than the content of what they were processing. The two sets of experiences, first in a political office, the second in an Eurocrat office under a very talented and knowledgeable Director (Francis co-authored the bible on the EP "*The European Parliament*", now in 5th edition) were complementary and provided great opportunities to utilise.

In retrospect, this lack of structure or defined purpose may not suit interns without experience working in government or other bureaucratic systems. I survived I think partly because I was looking for analogues from NZ government that I had worked in as my own mental reference framework. Also an existing external network of friends from former times made up for the reduced social interaction inevitably resulting from a "all care – no responsibility" work relationship.

3. Work experience

The outcome of this turmoil was that I had no significant set work to do for the first 6 weeks and minimal, but interesting, work in the second. I was required on occasion to utilise my English writing skills for political ends. However my largest contribution was to the "Austrian Marmalade Directive" which amends the "Breakfast" Directive (*Directive 2001/113/EC relating to fruit jams, jellies and marmalades and sweetened chestnut puree intended for human consumption*). This was minor, but I was able to help save the Austrian Breakfast. Jim Hacker and the Great British Sausage were at the forefront of my mind the whole time, and the solution is not too dissimilar. I will not elaborate on either work. I also undertook a review of the Parliament's Environment Committee's effectiveness.

In my case, the flexibility and freedom this gave was far and away much the better option as I was able to explore various research threads the experience offered (see below). The Intra- and Inter-net services also make accessing documents (once you know what you are looking for and where) easy. As well, the EP library has some very useful books that I borrowed. The geography of the place takes some working out, as it consists of a connected series of buildings, some missing floors due to high ceilings in the floors below. However important reference points, such as the *Mickey Mouse Bar* (it's the chairs, not the people) and the Self-service canteen were soon identified. (And Interns should make sure to eat at least once in the 12th Story restaurant in the Paul Henri Spaak Building, for the view alone, though this could require bluff.)

I spent considerable time following a particular directive through its stages: the Fluorinated Gas Directive (which are used for air-conditioning systems in cars and commercially, but do not help global climate change). This gave a conceptual framework for understanding how the Committees (the core working organs of the EP) in particular work, so I attended

- the first Environment Committee presentation

- the German Fraktion, EPP-ED Group discussion on the Environment Committee Agenda
- the EPP-ED Group Environment Committee members meeting
- the final Environment Committee meeting referring it to the Plenary
- the March Strasbourg Plenary though it was not on the agenda that time.

I also attended several other Committee meetings - each has its own character and issues, all revealing. (A word of advice: get to the hemicycle early on for committees such as Environment or when a Commissioner is going to give a presentation. The unlabelled (spare) seats where anyone – including stagiaires can sit are quickly taken by lobbyists and other stagiaires and you run the risk of being kicked out, and definitely not getting the translation headphones to understand what is going on! You also get to switch bottled water, petillanque or flat as preferred!). An advantage of working in the Committee Secretariat is that you are guaranteed a seat (including up on the Dias for my Directive).

I found following the committees very useful for several reasons: firstly, the whole decision-making process is through committees and this exercise helps to see how it all fits together. As well, downloading and digesting the relevant Commission Proposals, Rapporteur reports, other committee opinions and voting lists forced me to come to grips with the system. Secondly, I sensed the political power-plays underlying actions and decisions, reminding me that this ultimately is about politics and not administration. And that politics is definitely not for the faint-hearted, any appearances to the contrary that the processes may engender (I witnessed one Rapporteur watching two year's work on his dossier crumbling before his eyes. He realised too late what was going on, just as I knew it would, and just as most people thought it was just a chaotic meeting). Finally, I was able to sense both strengths and weaknesses the EP faces: the power co-decision gives the EP, enabling a democratic input into an otherwise technocratic process; but also the considerable technical information deficit MEPs face when evaluating policy choices.

I had been told Strasbourg Week is an essential element of the EP Experience even though a part-Plenary is held in Brussels and there is no reason for a stagiaire to go to Strasbourg. I attended two days at Strasbourg and I agree that it is an important experience and the costs are worthwhile. Quite apart from anything else, the architecture is impressive and initially confusing to find one's way around - though soon the important *Swan* and *Crazy Carpet* bars can be found easily (coffee and self-service canteen cost more in Strasbourg, too)!

The Parliament Building also hosts other events, which I made a point of attending. These included the EPP-ED Conference on the Chemicals Directive, 'auditions' for the new Accession-state Commissioners, and also a session of the EU's Committee of the Regions. I also attended a single-day seminar at the Austrian Embassy on the application of the Open Method Coordination to environmental policy development.

I also took the opportunity to meet more or less formally with others in and around the EP system:

- Commission officials, from Environment and External Relations Directorates
- several MEPs from different parties (a slightly delicate business)
- several MEPs' Assistants

- EP Environment Committee Secretariat staff
- EPP-ED Group Secretariat staff
- Northwest England Regions Brussels Representative
- Nordrhein-Westfalen Landtag CDU party official
- NZ Embassy staff and Ambassador
- Consultants working directly with the Commission administering implementation of the LIFE-Environment programme

This was achieved through a mix of luck, cheek and planning. For example, I made contact with the LIFE-Environment programme administrator at the New Zealanders in Brussels Group's (NZIB) Belgian beer tasting gathering in my first three days of arriving. Anton is a New Zealander from Marton though long-domiciled here and also works in environmental policy. We shared the rare ability to be able to drink Geuze, and he took me under his wing and introduced me to other people working in the business, both in his office and the Commission.

I also made several cold-calls and emails and chased them up to contact MEPs and officials from different parties, as well as contacting friends/partners of colleagues. All were very helpful, very interesting and stimulating to talk to.

The European Council Spring Summit circus also came to town, which also provided entertainment - and large-scale commuter inconvenience - in its own inimitable way. An attack helicopter parked in the air 800m away from my window was slightly unnerving, but less so than accidentally getting on the wrong side (i.e. inside) of the security cordon around the Council Building on Rondpoint Schuman with absolutely no good reason to be there.

4. Language and people

Language is an interesting issue: unlike the Commission, which works largely in French, the EP has adopted English as the major working language. This is helpful for Kiwis. However, the place is a Tower of Babel, with about 20 languages spoken (the Accession states already had people in the EP as observers). Although my German MEP colleagues were happy to speak English to me on an individual basis, in groups and when their colleagues visited or met, they all spoke German. My ability to survive in German I think helped build a better relationship and not feel left out of things. It also very much helped following what was going on in the Fraktion meeting. This did nothing for my French, however, and the lot fell to bits when I moved in to an office with Griet who spoke Flemish half the time!

Most people can survive in English alone, but added richness comes from having a second language. Also, from talking to officials and MEPs, the different nationalities have quite different approaches and views on parliament and its work – I suspect my time with the German MEPs was quite different from Lucy Cassels¹ who was with an English MEP in the same Group. I am sure another stagiaire with another country MEP would have quite a different experience again. Rotation by subsequent interns among different nationals would be good if it can be managed.

¹ Lucy Cassels, NZCRE Parliamentary Intern, September – November 2003

I was particularly touched by how friendly and interested everyone in both the MEP's office and Secretariat were. I had wondered if they would remain somewhat disengaged as I was an imposition at a busy time for them, for a short time only and was prepared for that. Similarly, the Embassy staff were also very welcoming and helpful – a far cry from my experience some 20 years ago!

5. Impressions

I went with a slightly cynical mind, though prepared to give the EP the benefit of the doubt. Much of the literature paints it as an expensive and inefficient talk-shop. Grandiose buildings, junkets to Strasbourg, the Euro-sausage and straight bananas, etc., etc. And they are right. It is all those and more. At the same time, Kiwis (or at least me) were perhaps not fully recognising the historicity of the institution - that CAP was not primarily about efficient agriculture, but about cultural maintenance, a strategic weapon to keep the Germans in line, and to avoid more Hungerjahren (and so that food could not be used as a strategic weapon by the French to keep Germans in line). No one (but the French possibly) wants to go to Strasbourg every month; it is a charming and quaint backwater with awful air connections and pokey offices (the grandness in French public buildings is reserved for the public parts – Versailles is not too great out the back either, apparently), for a start. But if this is the price to pay to establish the European Union then it is a cheap one.

Importantly, I see the EU as an experiment in the making, undertaken without a clean lab-bench. The EP is a part of that, an attempt to redress the democratic deficit that increases its effectiveness and power with time. The power of codecision has meant that the EP now has to be taken seriously. Consultants and lobbyists told me that they now put equal effort into both the Commission and the EP where there is codecision, having two bites of the cherry, one in the beginning and one near the end (they also of course work on country representatives at the Council).

But most importantly, and as many Plenary speakers allude quite clearly to, no matter how inefficient and expensive, the EU institution is a much better way for Europeans to resolve their differences than the traditional European way. Bosnia is seen as both a positive and negative in this regard – negative in that it required the USA to lead, positive in that it dealt an object lesson on the need for a relevant European forum. Paraphrasing Francis paraphrasing Michael Currie: despite its every effort to fail, the EP is doomed to succeed.

Some people questioned me at the beginning of the internship why I was going to the EP and not the Council “where all the decisions are really made”. I think that reflects lack of appreciation of how much things have changed in quite a short time, and all indications are that the EP's significance will continue to grow. In that regard, the Internship to the EP rather than Commission is appropriate, especially if one wants to learn about processes rather than content.

6. Extracurricular activities

Brussels is a unique city, batting well above its league with its range of people, richness and diversity as a consequence of its location and its position as European Capital. There is

something for everyone; for me the museums and art galleries are impressive – from the Royal Museums of Fine Art with its Breughels and other Flemish primitives, to the Wiertz Museum (only 3 minutes walk from Henri Spaark Building, and free entry) with its Nineteenth Century egoistic and gothic excess; quite apart from wandering around the streets of Schaerbeek and Ixelles taking in the Art Nouveau architecture (do not miss the Horta house in Rue Americain, or nearby Hannon Hotel).

As a classical music enthusiast, I had a very rich time – attending concert performances of baroque operas, celtic fiddle music, harpsichord and organ recitals. But the highlight for me was to take regular baroque bassoon lessons from a leading baroque period bassoonist (none exist in New Zealand) using a reconditioned Victoria University of Wellington instrument.

I also visited World War 1 battlefields at Ypres (my grandfather was wounded at Mesen/Messines in 1917 when the NZ Rifle Brigade fought in the Messines Offensive) and attended ANZAC Day there. Other excursions included the Moselle (wine tasting and cycling), Oostend coastal walk (catch the train there, and catch the tram back to the station when you have had enough, unlike a wander around the Coromandels!), and Binche for the Shrove Tuesday orange throwing procession (I bunked work that afternoon).

7. Conclusion

Each person I spoke to had a very different idea of what goes on and how in the EP, what other people do and how much they know, all of which is the basis for some research in itself. The practical lesson to take from this is, as Lucy wrote, to be highly flexible and take any opportunity if it is even remotely offered! Each stage is going to be very different, but immensely rewarding.

The people I met were without exception, friendly, interested and interesting, and helpful – somewhat humbling really. I have had many interesting discussions and had ideas challenged and new ones suggested. The whole Brussels Experience is a very condensed and special opportunity, to experience many different opportunities, both within and without the EP setting. Brussels, the Capital of Europe, has everything if you want to do it.

There are supposed to be two types of learning, academic - vicarious, and experiential. Working within the system gives a depth to understanding that no amount of reading books, journals or Internet pages can ever capture. I am going back to New Zealand able to put those materials into a far more firmly rooted real framework than otherwise would have been the case. The internship for me was very worthwhile and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to have benefited from it. My dissertation will take on a new dimension and incorporate new material as a result of both what I observed and my own reflections on those observations. As the Air NZ advertisement says, "Being there is everything".

8. Next Steps

Clearly the next step for me is to digest and contemplate on the Caprice Experience. I have accumulated significant information and contacts to prepare a paper for on aspects of the

information deficit facing Parliament, and institutional determinants to policy-making and implementation, useful for my dissertation. There are other, wider issues revolving around the relationship between New Zealand and EU that will take more time to crystallise.

9. Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the opportunity to take up the Internship, and thank Martin Holland, NZCRE, University of Canterbury, for making this possible. I especially thank Janet Lowe, NZ Embassy Brussels, for her tireless efforts to set it up. And of course, Frau Ewa Klamt and Francis Jacobs and their staff for being such open and willing hosts, and so prepared to share their experiences with me. I would like to think that they have gained something from hosting an Antipodean in return.

Finally but not least, I especially thank my wife, Marise, and family for letting me come away for three months. Coping with a full household is a big task in itself, let alone as a single-parent, and quite apart from having to accommodate the biggest floods in a century, a windstorm and a couple of earthquakes, not to mention the death of the pet rabbit while I was gone. It was all probably very character-building, but Marise may well feel that there were parts of her character that did not need any further construction.

JKM

Random observations that might help future Interns

1. Costs

This is provided so intending stagiaires know what they are in for – NZCRE made it clear that the stipend was limited and that additional own funding may well be necessary. The stipend does provide for the basics (and of course the airfare and most importantly the entrance into an amazing institution – lets keep things in perspective here!) I chose to live beyond my means as I do not know when I am going to be back in Town and with this degree of freedom, but each to their own priorities!

My impression is that internal purchasing power in NZ and Brussels are about the same – Belgian income is about twice as much, while costs (and tax) are also double. One Euro here buys more or less what one dollar buys in New Zealand. It is also an expensive town by European standards.

Item	Euros
Rent (month) – seedy student attic flat in Schaerbeek. This was on par with other European stagiaires' experiences.	400
Month bus/tram pass (month)	35.00
Hotel in Strasbourg (per night) book for Strasbourg week!	60
Train to Strasbourg (return)	110
Entrée in a reasonable restaurant/ pasta in a bistro	10
Main plate in a reasonable restaurant	14-18
Stoempf (bangers and mash) or bolognaise in a café	6-8
Main plate in the EP Selfservice canteen	3.50
A Beer in a café (Morte Subite Café has original character)	3.50
Museum entrance	5.00
Concert BOZAR	20.00
Film	8.00
Loaf of bread 400g (petit)	0.90
½ litre milk UH	0.55

Given monthly stipend is about Euro 800, stagiaires have about Euro 350 a month after rent and transport. Just think you have an allowance of \$90 a week and do not convert!

2. Random Tips and Suggestions

The doctors consultation at the EP is free, but be prepared to pay a small fortune for the prescription medicines from the chemist – it wasn't just my back I needed the pain-killers for!!

Le Soir on Wednesday publishes its MAD which has the week's entertainment guide, and is probably the only good reason for buying this two minute wonder.

The STIB, the city's public transport system is on the whole very good. It covers the city and rides are quite frequent, especially during commuter times. It has an online real-time timetable for all its bus stops, updated every 20 seconds (www.stib.be), so you do not have to stand in the cold for 20 minutes. But do not trust its route planner, otherwise you could. Month passes which cover all metro, tram and bus rides are available from the main STIB offices (the obscure one at Brouckere (down the side road between Anspach to Monnaie) is the most central. You need a passport photo. Monthly renewals can be obtained from some bookshops it seems and probably elsewhere. There are also various other ticket options. A clip gives you one hour's unlimited travel and you can jump trams and metro in that time.

Brussels is basically quite safe, but do watch out for pickpockets who are adept – I speak with experience here, unfortunately. And do not sign petitions, for while you are signing...

The best Frites (French fries - sic) the national dish, in Brussels are generally recognised to be served at Maison Antoine in Place Jourdan. Which is only five minutes away from the EP! The other snack is waffles, or gaufres. No shortage of stalls are down Rue Neuve. The best are at Danoy's near the Grand Place but they cost.

Best value for money chocolates are "Leonidas". They should come with a health warning!

The real local beers are "Geuze" and its cherry flavoured relative "Kriek" – which are both acquired tastes. The Artisan-brewed ones decidedly so! Also "Faro", which is very pleasant. Belgium overall is known for its Abby dark beers – Leffe, Grimbergen, Westmalle, Rochfort, etc, which can get up to 10% alcohol. A drink at the famously 1920s café, "Morte Subite" is worth the experience, or on a hot day at the Metropol on Anspach – both for ambience. Locals told me that "Stella Artois", the Belgian beer most known in NZ, is the only one guaranteed to give you a headache.